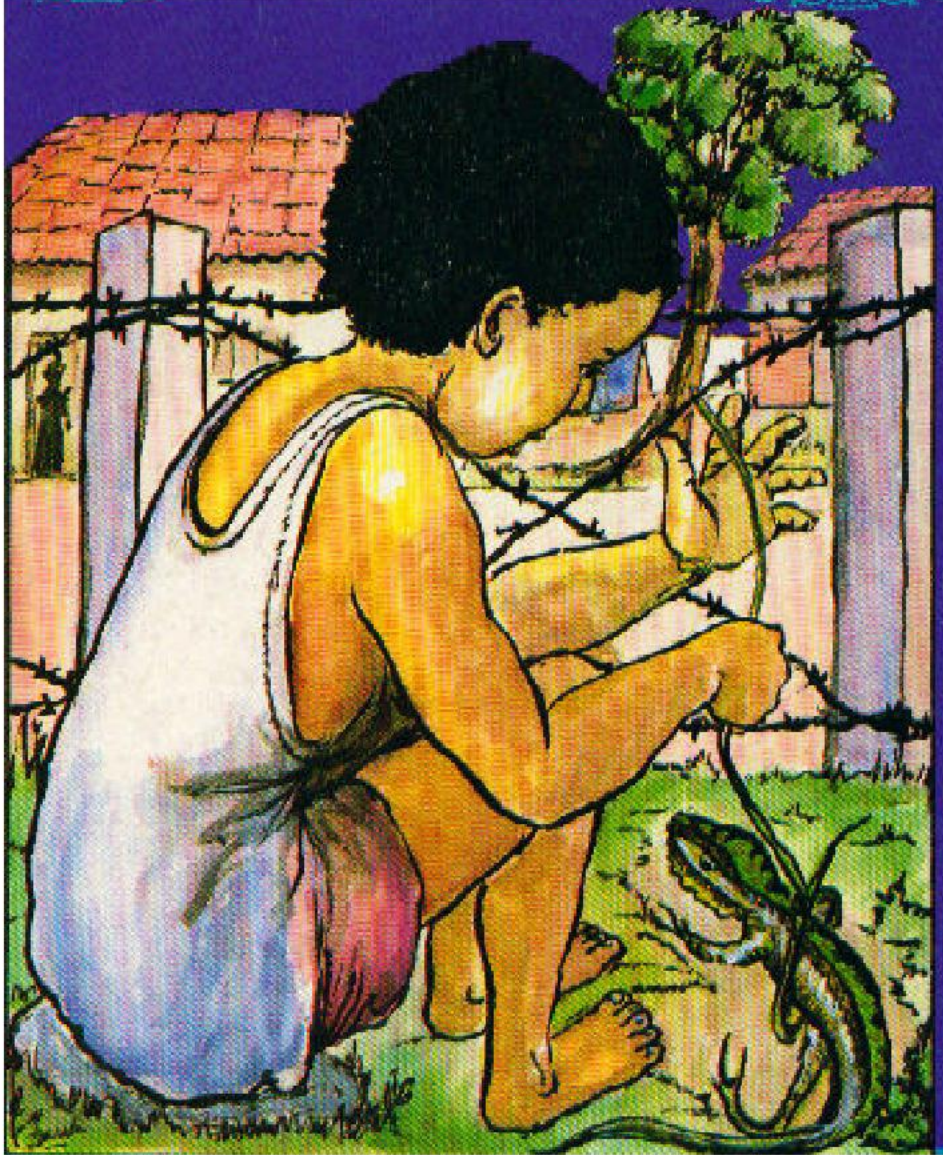


CURSE

Pudhuvai Ra Rajini

Illustration : Sarada Natarajan



Pudhuvai Ra Rajini

Pudhuvai is a young emerging Tamil writer. He is an Economics graduate and works at a luxury hotel in Bellur. His book, "Theevugalin Sandhipu," was published in 1994. His stories are based on poverty , which has become an integral part of our society. He frequently employs humor in his writings , a theme rarely seen in our daily lives. The inspiration for this story came from the fact that if we cause pain to a human being, he becomes distressed and curses us , also known as "haay!" But is only a suffering human being entitled to curse, or has God granted the same punishment to innocent creatures like butterflies and chameleons? Sensitized. Read the story and decide for yourself.

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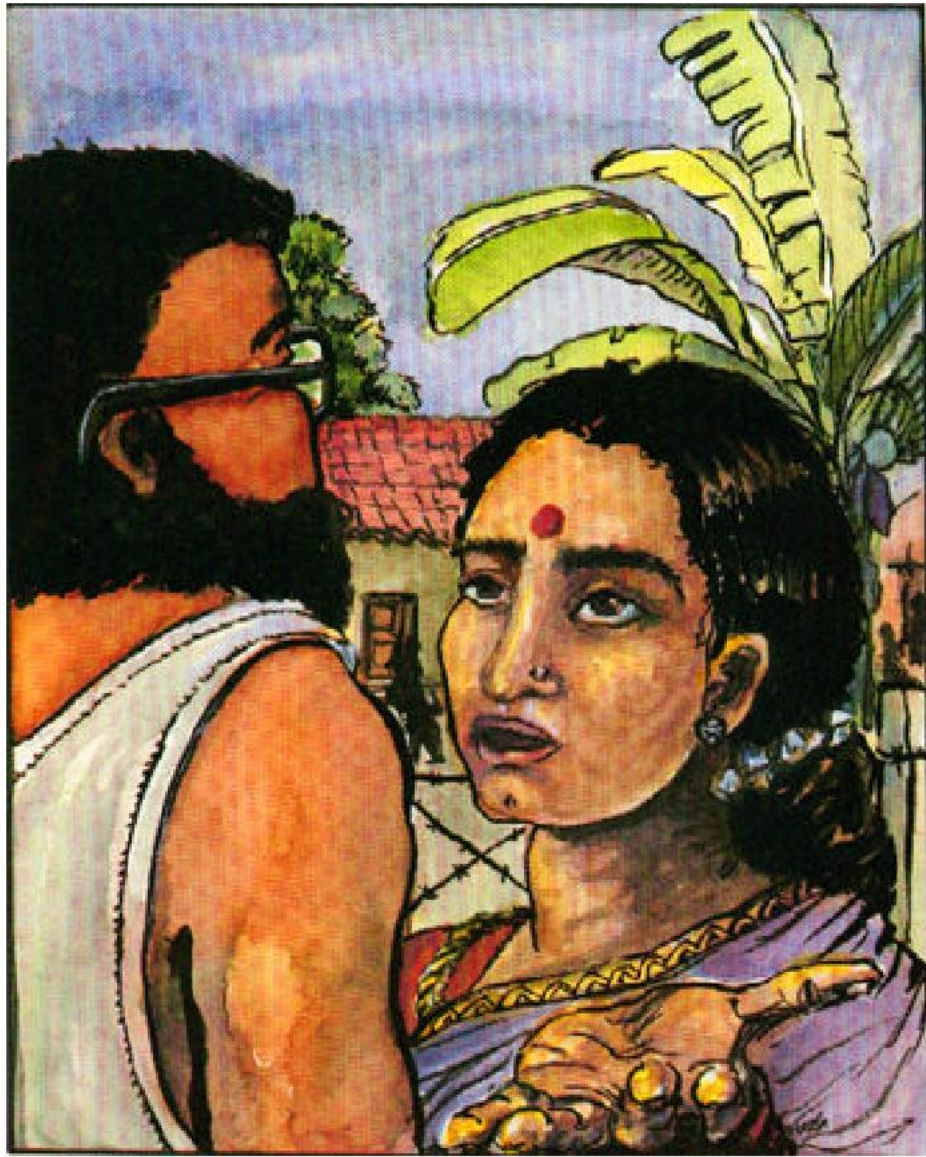
That little devil was walking along , holding a chameleon tied to a coconut rope. His face looked like a victorious warrior bringing his prisoner bound. There was a glow. I saw the chameleon, dangling from a rope like an old alligator bell. Its eyes were covered with white film. Its colors were green, yellow, and brown. There was a sudden shiver in the striped body , then it calmed down.

"Appa ... look...!" my son shouted, jumping with excitement.

"You should tell him, Appa, see..." As always, Vatsala was teaching him how to speak respectfully. Why don't you scold him? But why would I scold him? At his age, I used to run around doing similar pranks.

"Where did you catch this, son?" I asked, caressing his back.





"I was coming from the temple... " he said the whole story in one breath. He stopped shaking the rope, and the chameleon began to jump for freedom.

The old lady next door said, "You caught it again? Now fry it, season it with salt and pepper and eat it." And Nanhe immediately made a face at her in response.

"Hmm, then what?" I provoked him again.

"Yes, this is the most important thing left to do!" Vatsala said. "Pongal is just around the corner. Remember, I asked you to make something for my nephew, weighing half a tola ..."

From her words, it felt as if the excitement of Nanhe and my conversation had been put to rest. If only I were a chameleon, I would be hanging peacefully from this rope. I looked at Vatsala. "Where will I get the money now? I already owe Ganesh 400 rupees, and Victor 1300 ..."

"Come on, we have to do something . We can't ruin relationships. If people start gossiping, our reputation will be ruined." Both anger and fear were clearly visible in her voice.

"Appa, what should I do with the chameleon?"

What can one do with a caught chameleon?

"Free it," I replied.

He gently lowered the chameleon to the ground, its body stirred, and it slowly opened its eyes. Seeing the ground, it leaped forward, but the rope suddenly stopped it. Flapping its tail , it darted around. When Nanhe tried to untie its rope, the chameleon lifted its head . Nanhe quickly withdrew his hand.

I got up and untied the rope. The chameleon couldn't believe that she was free. She stood there stunned for a few moments, then quickly climbed onto the black platform of the Pillaiyar Temple and disappeared into the bushes behind.





The little one clapped his hands, jumping with joy. Childhood is so wonderful, worry-free and problem-free. But only for a short time.

In those days, there were neither paved roads nor paved drains. The red dirt roads were flanked by zigzagging unpaved drains. Near the drains stood Thopu Thatha's large garden, brimming with life.

Banana trees were laden with delicious fruit. Betel nut vines entwined them. Tall castor trees swayed in the breeze. Dried fruits flaunted on the lush branches. Thopu Thatha had also grown katnammani bushes and thorny plants.

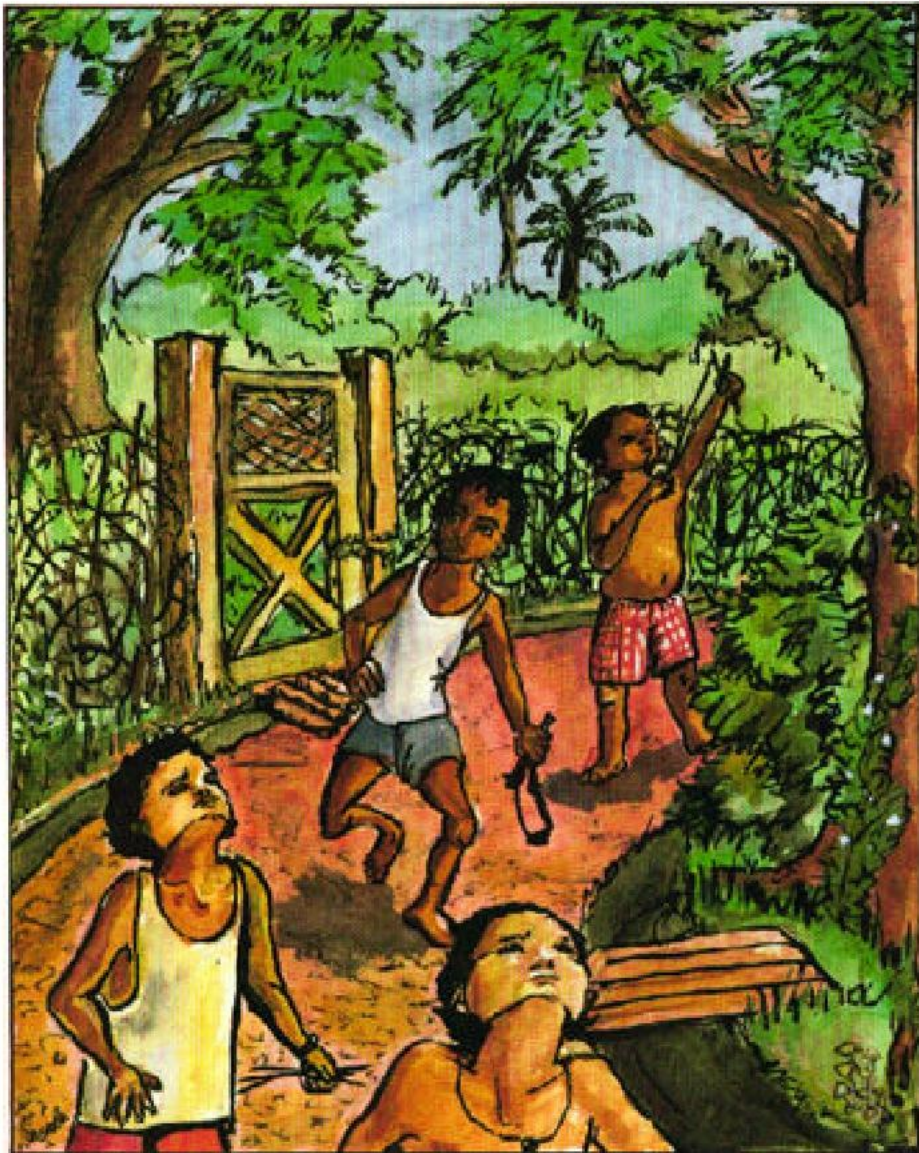
Our hunt would begin in the morning. Thambu , the lame Selvam , Zakir, and I. Thambu and I would carry the coconut rope. Zakir and Selvam, the slingshot. Selvam was unmatched in hunting chameleons. He would stagger and run after them.

His grandfather had legs like his , one long and one short. When he ran, the short leg dragged on the ground. He hated Selvam's attempt to catch the chameleon. So, he would limp and run after it, while it limped ahead . Whenever Selvam was caught , he would be beaten severely.

Chameleons lay in the bushes, almost out of sight. There were countless varieties. One was slender, with a slightly reddish body, constantly jumping from one plant to another. At Thambu's suggestion, we named it Varut.

One was pitch black, with a few white spots near its eyes. It was called the Spotted One, and if Selvam saw it anywhere, it would be in trouble!

Old chameleons were the most distinctive. They had a swollen, bitter-gourd-like body and a large head, making them scary. They were very easy to catch.





Then there was a Ram Chameleon – fat and healthy, very agile, she was our biggest enemy.

She once insulted Lord Rama. It is said that while Rama was in exile, he felt thirsty and asked a chameleon sitting on a bush for water. Far from giving him water, the cunning creature urinated on him. Enraged by the insult, Lord Rama cursed her, "Whenever you see me, you will be beaten."

But a squirrel brought coconut water and quenched his thirst.

Ram lovingly stroked the squirrel's back, where three black stripes are visible even today.

In addition to chameleons, we also caught green, red, and yellow bees and sealed them in matchboxes. They were found perched on the Katnamani bushes. We also didn't let go of the helicopter-sized dragonflies without catching them. We were fascinated by their wings, which repeatedly closed and opened.

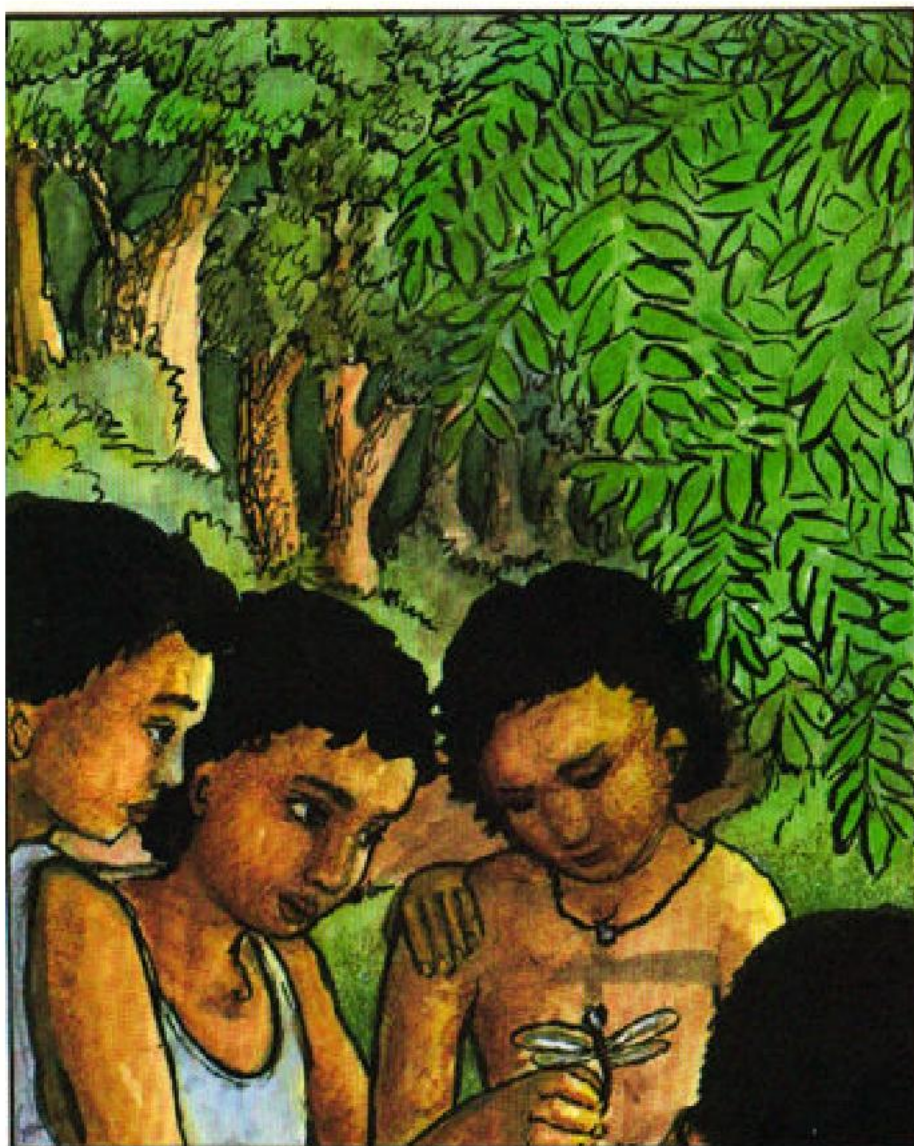
"So... what do we do now?" Vatsala broke my trance.

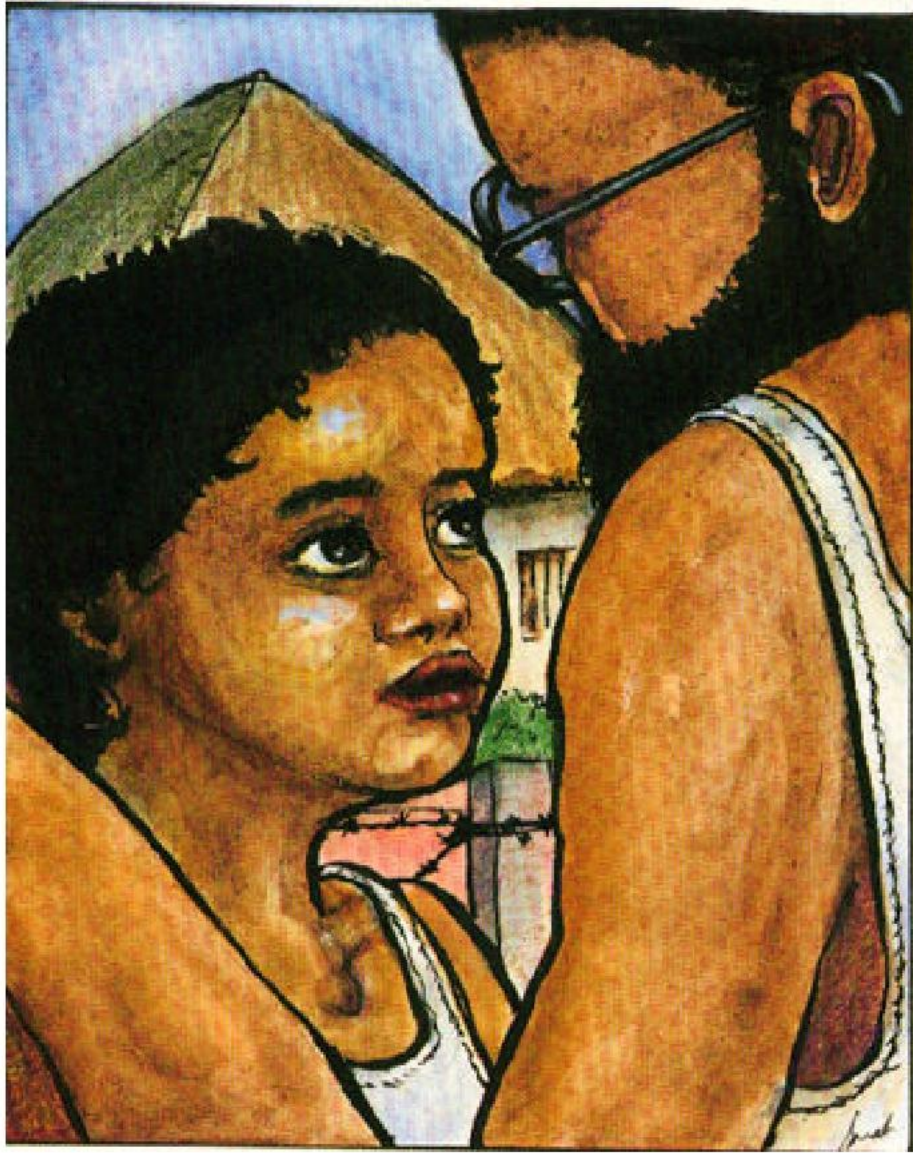
"Hmmm... " I started thinking. After marriage, all I did was think. There's nothing wrong with thinking. But if no one does anything, just...

I will have to gift something to my brother-in-law's son. It wasn't that I didn't want to give. But when I was alone, I would still save two hundred rupees after paying mother all the house expenses.

Now, between my wife, family, and relatives, I was racking up a debt of up to 300 rupees every month. Then there were many unseen expenses. But if I didn't give a gift, they would be taking revenge on Vatsala for the rest of her life. It was natural for her to be afraid.

"Appa, can you get me a water clock?" Nanhe interrupted my thoughts again.





"What?"

“Water clock ... !”

Nanhe must have seen the water clock with the landlord's grandson. Two days back he cried all night about the plastic AK- 47 gun he'd seen with him. What value do such toys have compared to a man who collects 500 rupees a month in rent from ten houses? He's asked us to vacate the house so many times, and his wife is an expert at it.

“Will you bring it, Appa?” the little one was adamant.

“Yes, yes I will bring it,” as soon as I said this Vatsala picked him up in her lap and took him inside.

If I had not taken him, his stubbornness would have increased and I would have remained helpless

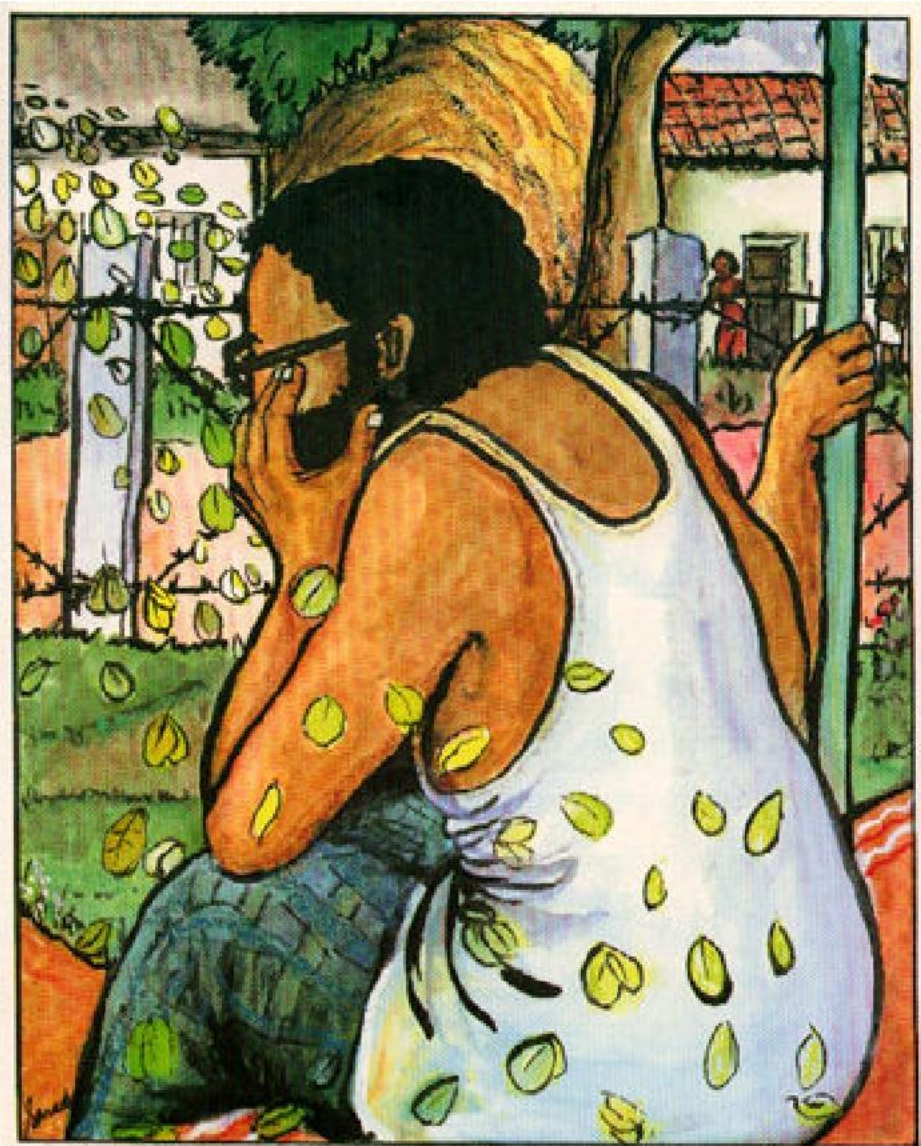
I put my hand under my chin and started thinking.

The sound of dishes being washed came from the neighboring house. A yellow leaf floated down from the sahjan tree in Mumtaz's courtyard. A gentle breeze was blowing.

Po! Po! Po! Someone had thrown a stone at a stray dog!

We used to catch chameleons every day. We would look for them by darting through the bushes that grew below our window.

There was a mimosa bush right next to the window. We would touch it repeatedly, watching its leaves shrink in fear. We would pluck the tender banana leaves and eat them. We would also chew betel leaves voraciously. Our lips would burn, and on top of that, we would even face beatings from our family members.



Those were wonderful days. So many sweet memories still linger. I don't know how many chameleons we sent to heaven. I don't know how many flies we trapped in matchboxes. ... Butterflies! I remembered them all. Was that a sin? ... Was it possible that we had sinned?

I'd have to ask Shekhar for a loan, I decided. It would cover the upcoming festival and the gift. I had no idea how I'd repay the loan.

From a distance, I saw my little son approaching. He held a butterfly in his right hand and its beautiful plucked wings in his left.

"Appa!" he said, running to show me.

For the first time I prepared myself to punish my son.